

A Clowder of Cats

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Summary: Al settles down for a while at Mustang's suggestion, and it doesn't take him long to start collecting cats.

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>Fandom: _Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood_/manga

>Author: Batsutousai

>Rating: Teen

>Pairings: Alphonse Elric & Cats (don't judge me)

>Warnings: Mentions of abuse towards animals, sick and hurt animals, Ed's potty mouth

>Summary: Al settles down for a while at Mustang's suggestion, and it doesn't take him long to start collecting cats.

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****A/N:**** I felt the need to try and figure out Al's voice, and I keep meaning to do something with Al and cats, so... Not even a little sorry.

(I'm a catsitter irl, so all of these cats are based off ones I've had, or have sat. If anyone's interested in photos, shoot me an ask on tumblr and I'll post a few. :)

You can also read this at Archive of Our Own, tumblr, or LiveJournal.

Jerso and Zampano had found their cures in Xing, and while they'd waited until Al was ready to go back to Amestris himself to actually leave him, it'd been clear for a while that they were itching to get home to their families. Al did understand, even if his own family was probably somewhere in Creta, causing an international incident. (He somehow doubted Ed losing his alchemy would keep him from making trouble for everyone else.)

At any rate, Al'd sped up his alkahestry studies and returned to Amestris as soon as possible, so the chimeras could head home. Which had left him at loose ends, a bit, wandering between Resembool and Rush Valley and Dublith, until Brigadier General Mustang suggested he take a few classes at the Central City University, on the military's coin.

Al briefly wondered who'd called him to ask for help getting Al to settle down, and then he realised he was beginning to sound like Ed with all his conspiracy theories about the general and decided that he probably should settle for a little bit and focus on something. So he thanked the general, let everyone know where he'd be, then made his way to Central.

As the general had suggested, FÅ¼hrer Grumman was quick to assure him that the military would pay for any fees on his behalf, as well as a modest flat near campus, if he didn't want a dorm " Al didn't, though he'd debated agreeing to take one just to keep from being too much of a problem, until the FÅ¼hrer told him to just take the flat.

When Al had asked why the military was being so generous, the FÅ¼hrer had smiled and explained, "You were an integral part of the events on the Promised Day, and it's our duty to ensure you've been properly rewarded for your part."

And then he'd leant back in his chair, coughed, and added, "Also, your brother still has money in his account, as he wasn't taken off the payroll when he was on the run, which I don't believe he's aware of. I suspect he won't mind you dipping into that."

Al coughed himself and shook his head, because he knew Ed would be adamant that he use that money if there was anything he wanted. "I'm sure he'd be happy to see it being put to use, sir," he offered. "Although, I don't have any way to get in contact with him to check, right now."

The FÅ¼hrer shook his head. "I believe you're still on his list of people authorised to withdraw money from his account, even if your appearance has changed a great deal since he first added you."

That...was true, and Al thanked him again, collected all the paperwork and information he needed so the university and his new landlord both knew to charge the military on his behalf, then went in search of his new adventure.

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The only real problem with starting at university, was that Al didn't really know what to study. They didn't have anything more than the

most basic alchemy classes â€" Alchemy 101, or (as Ed would have called it) Alchemy for Morons â€" which looked to be more about informing students what alchemy was and what it was capable of, than teaching them how to use it.

He'd picked up Xingan medical alkahestry while he'd been there, so he signed himself up for a biology class, and also a couple chemistry classes, since that was related to alchemy. On a whim, he'd added a literature course, so he wasn't only taking science classes. (Ed would have been aghast.)

He settled in quickly enough and made a few friends, despite the odd look people would sometimes get when they found out he was the (former) Fullmetal Alchemist's younger brother. It was actually quite nice to be settled, and he rang Brigadier General Mustang during his second month to thank him for the suggestion, to which the general replied, "You're more than welcome, Alphonse. I'm glad to hear you're enjoying yourself, and I'm sure we both know your brother would be grateful you've found something outside the military's control to focus your energy on."

Which was very true, and Al wished there was some way he could tell Ed what he was up to, but any letter he sent out seemed to vanish into the void. He could only hope that his brother was getting them, and was just being his usual impossible self about writing back.

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Midway through his third month, when he was walking home in the rain, he heard a rather familiar, pitiful cry, and found himself hunting it down before he'd really thought about it. The cat he found was all black with wide green eyes and a bedraggled expression, and Al was so unspeakably glad, in that moment, that he wasn't living in the dorms, because he could pick the cat up and carry it home.

He dried it off and gave it some water and meat from the refrigerator, then hurried back out to get supplies. Because, despite all of Ed's mutterings about how he didn't know how hard it would be to take care of an animal, Al did know; he'd looked it up in the library.

The cat spent a little bit exploring the new items, ate some food, and then came over to where Al was attempting to work on some homework â€" and failing, because he kept catching himself watching the cat when it was in view, and looking for it when it wasn't â€" and very determinedly climbed onto his lap. When Al leant back in his chair, the cat leant up, paws on his shoulder, and nudged his chin once with its nose, then rested its chin on its paws and, by all appearances, fell asleep.

Al was charmed beyond words, and settled in to just pet his new flatmate, homework completely forgotten.

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It turned out the cat was male â€" Al had made a run to the Central Library to find out how to tell â€" and Al decided to call him Gilbert, because he just...struck him as a Gilbert.

Gilbert was especially fond of cuddling whenever Al was trying to do something, and attacking anything and everything that moved, including fingers. Al found he didn't mind that much, as it meant he constantly had company, but he did get some odd looks whenever he came to class with new claw marks on his fingers.

Another book explained how to safely clip Gilbert's claws, which he very much did not like, but it did result in fewer bandaged fingers. Finding him a stuffed toy " a goose that had been a gag gift from a university friend " gave him something else to focus on, too, which meant Al got more work done.

Essentially, they learnt to live with each other, and Al occasionally joked that he should have named Gilbert 'Ed', as he was really rather like his brother sometimes. (He wouldn't have; as soon as Ed found out, he'd storm back to Amestris for the sole purpose of either killing Al, or the cat. Which...well, thinking of it that way, it was almost tempting.)

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The next two cats he got, he would insist until the day he died, were not his fault. A friend of a friend was leaving Central and couldn't take their cats with them, so Al's friend had suggested him, since it was no secret he loved cats. And, well, Al had honestly intended to say no " Gilbert was enough of a handful on an average day, and he'd read that cats didn't always get along " but then he met them and just...

They were both long-haired, with massive, bushy tails. The girl, Leena, was a calico, and she had the softest fur Al had ever felt. Al...maybe a lot fell in love with her.

Her brother's name was Charlie, and he was orange all over, save for his white belly and paws. His tail was a bit bushier and his fur wasn't as soft, but their owner insisted they couldn't be separated, so Al ended up taking both of them.

Charlie and Gilbert spent almost two weeks stalking around the place, hissing and growling at each other, while Leena watched everything from up high and ate their food when they weren't looking. (And Al really did adore her.)

When the boys finally settled, they did so by becoming playmates. And while the occasional outbreak of screeching and yowling made him jump if he didn't have the advance notice of watching one of the two stalking the other, Al got a lot more work done with the boys amusing each other, and Leena was always happy to nap next to him and he could touch her soft fur as much as he pleased.

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One day, he got home from class and found Gilbert, Charlie, and Leena all sat in a row in front of the sliding glass doors to his small balcony. When he came over to see what had them all so interested, he found a grey cat with white paws and a little bit of orange-brown on one haunch sitting at the edge of the balcony, looking down at the alley his flat overlooked. He suspected it was deriving pleasure from tormenting his three flatmates, and would have just walked off and left them to it, if he hadn't noticed the blood staining its left

ear, the tip of which looked to be missing.

He locked his three into the bedroom, then opened the balcony door and "cheating with alchemy" managed to catch the stray and take it in to the veterinarian he'd been introduced to by Leena and Charlie's original owner.

"She likely would have been fine if you've left her," Dr Anderson promised, once she'd finished cleaning off the blood and got a good look at the wound. "See, it's already clotting nicely."

It was, Al realised, and the cat didn't appear worried about it. But still.

"She is a little thin," Dr Anderson continued, gently petting the cat, who looked like she couldn't decide between loving and hating the attention, "which isn't uncommon in strays, as I'm sure you're aware. Don't be afraid to put food out for her, if you're worried about her."

"I...might just," Al allowed as he held out his hand to her. She sniffed it, cast him a considering glance, then very pointedly turned away from him, which Al had discovered, thanks to Leena, meant he was allowed to pet her. He didn't get clawed for it, and she didn't fuss when he picked her up to take her back to his neighbourhood, which was really all he could ask for.

He did start leaving food out for her "and regularly had to hold Gilbert and Charlie back as he put it out, as they both seemed quite intent on the bowl. It was always empty by the end of the day, and he saw her a few more times, but she always ran when he approached the balcony door.

He decided to call her Muffins, because the patches of brown-orange on her belly and haunches looked a little like muffins on a baking tray, in the right light, and resigned himself to only ever being allowed to watch her from afar.

Well, at least his three were calm when she visited.

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The next time he visited Dr Anderson was, again, because of a stray, but not Muffins. He'd found a group of boys terrorising a dirty cat that was limping, and scared them off before gently catching the cat and bringing it in.

"I'm afraid that might be a broken leg," Dr Anderson announced fairly quickly, "and it feels like he's got quite the fever. Let me get the thermometer."

Al took over gently petting the cat, who was shivering and had curled up as tight as it could. "It'll be okay, little guy," he promised.

"It will," Dr Anderson agreed, as she brought over the thermometer, already covered in petroleum jelly. Al kept petting the cat as she inserted the thermometer, and the cat flinched a bit and shifted a bit closer to Al. "If he's got a fever, depending on how bad it is," Dr Anderson warned, "he may have to spend the night here, until we

can bring it down."

Al nodded in understanding. "And the leg?"

"If it's broken, it'll need to be kept as immobile as possible," she said, shrugging a bit helplessly. "We can keep him hereâ€"

"I can take him," Al insisted.

She eyed him for a moment, before looking away to pull out the thermometer. "That's a fever," she announced, before standing. "Come back tomorrow with a proper carrier for him, and the assurance that you have somewhere you can keep him separate from the rest of your brood, and I'll let you take him home."

Al swallowed and nodded. "Yes'm."

As soon as she shooed him out, Al went home, debated the rooms of his flat, and got to work alchemising a corner of his living room for the new cat.

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Once his fever was gone, the new cat proved he was quite against humans being allowed anywhere near him, which Al fully understood, after the way he'd found him. He changed his food and litter every day, made an effort not to bother him over-much, and tried not to cry on Charlie too much, as the new cat looked like a smaller version of him with shorter fur.

He started calling the new cat Mokkaun, for a fox in one of the stories he'd heard while he was in Xing, which had come from the far-eastern islands. The fox had been extremely shy around humans, but kindness had eventually won its friendship and the granting of a wish. Al didn't care about the wish, but he was interested in the friendship, so it seemed an acceptable name.

When Mokkaun's cast was finally removed, he let him out to meet Charlie, Leena, and Gilbert, crossing his fingers that there wouldn't be a problem.

And there wasn't. The weeks of proximity had clearly paved the way, and Mokkaun almost immediately rolled over and showed his belly, which seemed to be enough for Charlie and Gilbert to decide he was okay. Leena seemed to care about as much as she did about anything else, and so Mokkaun joined the household.

That first night, not long after Al had turned off all the lights and climbed into bed, he was surprised to hear a ridiculously loud purr start up, just before a sleek body hopped up and joined him on the bed, nudging his face and kneading his shoulder through his blanket.

"Mokkaun," Al whispered, shocked.

If anything, Mokkaun's purring got louder, and he didn't flinch away when Al reached up to pet him. So Al fell asleep to the thrumming purr of his newest flatmate.

The next morning, Mokkaun was back to avoiding him, but he climbed

into Al's bed every night after he'd settled in, and purred until Al fell asleep.

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Al was insistent that four cats were enough, especially since he was also feeding Muffins and at least one of her friends â€" a cat that was mostly black, save for little speckles of orange along its back, and white paws, who always hissed when it saw him, would wind around his ankles if he stepped outside to say hello, and waited until he wasn't looking to flee â€" but when RosÃ© came for a visit and brought an all-white female cat with her, he found it almost impossible to say no.

"Her name's Morgana," RosÃ© said as he petted her. "I'm told it's a name from one of the older, western mythologies, something to do with a sorceress and enchanting men's hearts?"

Al huffed at her.

And then Morgana apparently decided she'd had enough petting, because she let out the most delicate-sounding cross meow, took a swipe at him that he was far too practised to let hit, and stalked off to find higher ground and groom herself. All the while looking like she was posing for a photoshoot.

"I already have four cats, RosÃ©," he tried.

"I know," she agreed, nodding, "but they're mostly male, and I do feel a little bad for that one little girl. Who, by the way, is beautiful. I'm certain she'll give Morgana a run for her money."

Morgana looked up at her name, gave them a considering look, then hopped down and flopped over on the floor, losing all show of dignity to roll on her back and give them a 'come hither' look.

"Don't," RosÃ© suggested with a wary laugh. "She'll take your hand off."

Al shot her a disbelieving look. "You want me to take a cat with murderous intent?"

RosÃ© gave a shrug and looked away, suddenly looking a lot less cheerful. "The thing is," she explained quietly, almost lost under Morgana's entreating meow, "her owner is getting married to someone who's allergic, and there aren't many people in Liore looking to take in a cat. Her owner was just going to put her out on the street, but she's so pretty, and I thought of you..."

Al sighed and looked back at Morgana, who had given up trying to entice them over and was grooming herself again. He could practically hear Ed complaining about how much of a 'bleeding heart' he was, but he didn't have it within himself to put a cat out on the street, pretty or not.

So he took Morgana home, corralled her in the bathroom for a week, then let her out to mingle.

The boys didn't seem to care one way or the other, but she and Leena

didn't seem particularly keen on each other. They eventually settled for posing on opposite sides of the room, and Morgana startled all of them when she proved she had quite the set of lungs on her, the first time Mekkun tried attacking her tail.

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"You," his brother said before Al could get the door open the whole way, "have a problem."

"Brother!" Al shouted, jumping forward to envelop Ed in a hug.

Ed let out that huffing noise that he always made when he was trying to pretend he was annoyed by something, but he hugged Al back at least as hard as Al was hugging him, so he knew his brother had missed him.

And then, with no warning, Ed pulled away and ducked down. When he straightened, he was holding Gilbert. "I see you have an escape artist."

"_Gilbert_," Al scolded, and Gilbert almost seemed to hang his head in shame.

"Oh, fuck me, you've named them," Ed muttered, in a helpless tone. "There went any hope I had of freeing you from your own insanity."

Al rolled his eyes. "Come in," he insisted, taking Gilbert. "You can meet all of them."

"Please tell me you were kidding about having _five_," Ed complained as he grabbed his suitcase and followed Al inside.

Al cleared his throat and tried to pretend his cheeks didn't feel hot. "You've been getting my letters?" he tried, in hopes of distracting his brother.

"If you mean the documentation of your slow spiral into the hell that is becoming a crazy cat laâ€œ"

"_Edward_," Al warned, turning to glare at his brother.

Ed flashed him a sharp smile and corrected, "Crazy cat man."

Al set Gilbert down, since Ed had closed the door behind himself. "There's nothing wrong with having a few cats," he insisted.

"Alphonse," Ed returned flatly, "five is more than a few."

Ed sort of had a point there, and Al winced and rubbed at the back of his neck. "I _did_ try and refuse RosÃ©, but she said Morgana would end up out of the street if I didn't take her, and I _couldn't_ do that to her."

Ed sighed and rubbed at her face. "I'll kill RosÃ© later," he muttered.

"_Brother_!"

Ed shot him a flat look. "They have animal shelters in Central," he pointed out drily.

Al felt his face heating up again.

"No more cats."

Al felt a whisper of irritation at that ultimatum. "I'm twenty years old, Brother. You can't justâ€"

"Cut off your access to my bank account?" Ed suggested, raising an eyebrow.

Al felt briefly wrong-footed, realised he wasn't used to being the one on the receiving end of a dressing down for his behaviour, and felt caught between incensed and embarrassed. Because Ed was right, it was his money that was being used for the cats, and Al had told himself four was enough, but he hadn't held to that.

Al grimaced and turned away. "When did you grow up?" he complained.

Ed snorted and moved behind him, too fast for Al to do more than tense, before his shoulder was shoved, then caught in one hand as Ed stepped up next to him and shot him a smile filled with trepidation. "Right. Introduce me to your herd."

"Clowder, Brother," Al corrected. "A herd is a group of horses."

"It worries me that you know that," Ed muttered, while Al led him on a tour of his flat.

They managed to find Leena, Morgana, and Charlie fine, and Ed had already met Gilbert, but Al wasn't surprised when Mekkun was scarce, and shrugged it off. "You might see Mekkun if you spend the night," he offered as Ed dropped into his couch with a groan.

Ed shot him a knowing look. "I dunno. How likely am I to wake up with a pile of fucking cat hair in my mouth?"

Al very obviously rolled his eyes at him.

Ed grinned and leant back against the couch. "I might. But I can't stay too long; Winry's been threatening shit if I don't contact her real soon."

Al sighed. "It's called a phone, Brother. I have one," he called back as he went to get them both a glass of water from the kitchen.

"I'm allergic," Ed replied, so deadpan, Al actually had to pause for a moment and think over what he'd just said.

"No, you're not!" he snapped.

Ed let out a laugh, which he silenced rather suddenly with a confused sound. "Hi?" he said somewhat uncertainly.

Al frowned and left the glasses to step out of the kitchen and look toward the couch, only to stop and stare upon finding Mokka sitting next to Ed on the couch, eyeing him as uncertainly as his brother was eyeing the cat.

"That's Mokka," he offered quietly, hoping not to startle the most prone to fleeing of his cats.

"Uh, what does it want?" Ed asked, not looking away from the cat sitting next to him.

"I'm pretty sure he likes you."

"Oh, well, that is a shit life choice, fluff-ball," Ed informed Mokka, waving a finger at him.

Mokka nudged his nose against the finger and, when Ed froze, leant forward, rubbing the side of his face against it.

"...what?" Ed said.

Al retreated to the kitchen to laugh.

When he finally calmed down enough to collect the glasses and bring them out, he found that Mokka had moved to Ed's lap and was kneading his left thigh and purring as loudly as he could. "I think," he told Ed as he sat his glass on the table in front of him, easily within his reach, admittedly a little surprised when Mokka didn't flee, "you'll have to keep him."

"I am not getting a fucking cat!" Ed snarled.

Al smiled and sat in the chair across from him, asking after his travels, rather than pointing out that Mokka wasn't going to give him a choice.

Within five minutes, Ed was scratching Mokka's head, and Mokka fell asleep not long after that.

When Ed left two days later, Mokka went with him, and Al just laughed when Winry called him to complain.

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End
file.